Clam Lake Elk News [Third Quarter—July through September, 2005]

Current Status: Since the beginning of the 2005 calving season we've lost six of the 17 calves found this year (of an estimated 26 that were born). Plus, we also lost cow 14 (the "Hurley Girl"), 2-year-old bulls 134 and 138, and yearling bull 152. That's a total of 10 animals lost since mid May. Using the estimate of 124 elk after calving season, and using a nine-year average observed mortality to projected mortality ratio, then those 10 collared mortalities expand to 17 projected mortalities for Elk Year (EY) 2004-2005 and 12 mortalities for EY 2005-2006. This then translates to a current elk population of 113 animals.

Elk Research on the Clam Lake Herd: There's no word yet whether UW Madison's Monica Turner and Dean Anderson have received approval of their National Science Foundation grant application proposing GPS radio collaring 12 wolves and eight cow elk in and around the Clam Lake area to further investigate how wolves influence elk distribution on the landscape. UW Stevens Point will begin its Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation co-funded investigation of liver fluke and brain worm parasites on the Clam Lake elk herd in January. WDNR elk project staff will be collecting elk feces and elk mortality liver samples for the researchers during the duration of the study.

Elk Health Issues: <u>Mortality</u>: The telemetry mortality signal for F14 was received on July 5 by elk project staff. Investigation of the death site was made on July 7. From condition of the remains we estimate time of death as either July 2 or 3. From sign at the death site it's apparent that Cow 14 was killed by wolves. By examining F14's lower jaw, found at site, we estimate F14's age at 18-20 years. We've submitted a couple incisors for sectioning to determine more definitively the likely age of F14.

Cow 14, better known as the "Hurley Girl," was the individual who dispersed north east, almost reaching Hurley, back in 1995. She was recaptured, collared and released back near Clam Lake at the beginning. She's lost a couple calves to bears in the late 90's and one to a dog in 2001. She was captured with three other cows and three calves in March of 2002, but jumped out of the trap during the night before processing. She was recaptured in January of 2005 and re-collared. On March 25, she fell through the ice of the west fork of the Chippewa River near several recreational feeding operations, but was rescued and survived the ordeal. At that time and during subsequent viewings, it was determined that F14 did not appear pregnant and it does not appear that she gave birth to a calf in 2005. During the last several months since her rescue, she was sometimes located alone, separate from other elk. Maybe she had lost vigor because of her age or her March accident. Maybe she had acquired brainworm or liverfluke. Regardless, she apparently lost her last fight. We feel that she was killed by wolves and not scavenged, because conditions described by the canoeists who discovered her and sign at the site indicated a kill rather than being scavenged.

On July 21, while conducting telemetry locations elk project staff investigated two elk mortalities signals discovering wolf kill sites for 2-year-old bulls 134 and 138. Matt had conducted a mortality check on Monday and did not receive mortality signals from either animal then. The signals came from the same general area in the vicinity of cow 14's kill site. Both bulls were collared this past winter with a special expansion modified calf collar. Both had been killed by wolves, likely the Ghost Lake Pack who was probably responsible for Cow 14's death on about July 2-3.

It is likely bull 134 was killed during the weekend of July 16-17 and that wolves were still moving the collar around on Monday (our mortality check day). Except for a few bones (vertebrae and ribs), he was almost totally consumed.

Bull 138 must have wandered into the vicinity Wednesday night (July 20) and been killed by the same pack. It was apparent bull 138 died Wednesday night as the blood had barely dried and there was no decomposition yet. We were able to recover the fresh neck and head of bull 138. There was about 50-100 pounds of meat combined left from both front legs and neck, indicating the wolves were either not quite done yet or still pretty full from bull 134.

Telemetry indicated that both bulls had been moving separate from one another and other animals. Again, lone animals seem to be most vulnerable. However, it's also evident that the Ghost Lake Pack is becoming quite skilled in making elk kills! On July 21, Adrian Wydeven reported that at least part of the Ghost Lake Pack was located about two miles to the north near Goodwin Lake. We speculate that the entire pack must have been present in order to consume two 700 pound bull elk in less than a week's time.

On August 15 elk project staff heard a mortality signal for yearling bull 152 in the Goodwin Lake area (area of the July 21 Ghost Lake Pack activity determined by Adrian Wydeven, per. comm.). Staff attempted to approach from the north and southwest across a large swamp and bog area, but lost all signal from the collar on August 16. We speculate that wolves had killed bull 152 and chewed on the smaller calf collar disabling it. We were unable to determine the specific area of the death site. It is also possible that the collar malfunctioned, but this would be the exception rather than the rule.

On August 29 elk project staff heard a mortality signal for cow calf F163. We found F163 on her left side facing north. There were no clear signs of trauma, and we conducted a field necropsy at death site. Photos, descriptions and tissue samples have been recorded and will be turned over to WDNR wildlife health staff.

Other elk health issues. Earlier this year we had an elk crossing sign stolen near the intersection of CTH "S" and STH 77. This is dangerous not only for the elk but for motorists and constitutes a criminal act. If anyone has information leading to prosecution and conviction of the perpetrators the elk will be forever grateful and I'll personally give anyone helping us a Clam Lake elk tour.

Public Education: During this quarter we gave seven elk presentations to 585 participants, three print media interviews; and three radio interviews.

Partnerships: RMEF and other citizen volunteers cooperated in three field work days this past August and September, preparing three habitat development projects for "critical spring food habitat" plantings. On September 10, 11 and 24, elk project staff cooperated with RMEF on Bugle Days elk education activities.

Monitoring: During this period we made 806 telemetry location determinations and 1,612 telemetry mortality checks (mortality checks plus locations).

2005 Mating Season: During the 2005 elk rut elk project staff heard our first bugle on August 25, and heard 13 different bulls on the morning of September 8 when a cold front came through. Through telemetry we detected between 12 and 15 herd bull harems. Aggressive bugling was heard through September 24 with challenges between bulls indicating greater overlap and less distinct separation between "gathering" and "tending" stages of the rut than observed in previous years.

Elk Trapping: Last year we had an accident where cow 96 jumped up and came down between two panels trapping her left front leg between inter-panel connectors. We quickly released her and no permanent injury resulted. This past spring we captured cow 96's calf, F160, and observed cow 96 several times and there is no lameness showing she's fully recovered. However, in an effort to prevent such an accident again, elk project staff have designed and had fabricated changes to the elk trap that will

prevent this from happening again. Jeff Morden of Overhead Material Handling, Inc. has offered his services to help with these improvements.

Elk Feeding: First it must be clarified that baiting is to lure deer or bear to where they can be shot while hunting. Feeding is the recreational feeding next to one's house to attract deer for viewing. During the past 10 years, an investigated 18 cases of elk mortality have been investigated that appear to be related to elk/deer feeding activities. Elk project staff are scheduled to present elk health concerns relating to recreational feeding to the Natural Resources Board on October 26, 2005. We will also be initiating private landowner contacts seeking public cooperation in preventing recreational feeding of deer and elk in the core elk range. Significant mortality from vehicle collisions, falling through weak ice or abnormal concentrations causing heightened parasite infestations can be prevented by residents not feeding deer and elk within the core range of the Clam Lake elk range (see attached map). Though it is legal to recreationally feed deer within 50 yards of a residence, greater than 100 yards of any road marked 45 mph speed limit or greater, with a maximum of two gallons of deer food, it is illegal to feed elk and bears. We would hope, for the sake of the health of the elk and their continued herd growth that folks will voluntarily not feed deer and elk in the Clam Lake area--especially if elk are visiting their properties.

Upcoming Events: As normal elk activities calm down during the 4th quarter of the calendar year. This is the time of year we prepare and start our annual elk trapping. This year we hope we can get a capture in before the new year, however, we'll take what we can get. With hunting seasons already up and running, we'll be promoting elk protection activities through hunter education and signing out on the elk range.

Laine Stowell & Matt McKay, July 5, 2005.

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